

The Mirror

Spring 1991

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The Mirror

Phillips Academy's Arts and Literary
Magazine, since 1854

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Table of Contents

Kathleen O'Brien Photograph.....	cover
David Wilhelm Photograph.....	6
Alice Wu He Moved In Last Summer.....	7
Donna Palma Coppola Photograph.....	10
Deborah Goldman Goldfish and Marmalade.....	11
Amber Miller Ceramic.....	12
Sam Robfogel The Painting.....	13
Mary Catherine Campbell Marshmallow Nougat.....	15
Seth McCormick Ink Drawing.....	16
Charlie Glass Convalescence.....	17
Kate Kennedy Photograph.....	18
Sarah Gallagher My Howl.....	19
Jason Haas Photograph.....	20
Alex Spare Pyramid.....	21
Hazel Boyd Pencil Drawing.....	20

Table of Contents

Nur-ul-Haq	
A Poem's Poem.....	22
Douglas Kern	
The Listener.....	25
Holly Parker	
Life Games.....	27
Nite Kongtahworn	
Photograph.....	28
Buck Glenn	
Where the Hell is Toledo, Ohio.....	29
Tswakai Tsomondo	
Combustion.....	31
Max Ullrich	
Photograph.....	32
Peter Ryang	
Wood Sculpture.....	34
Christopher Robertson	
Where You Goin'.....	35
Diana Zipeto	
Photograph.....	36
I Never Thought I Had No Hair	
Jennifer Wu.....	37
Trawick Stubbs	
Photograph.....	42



He Moved In Last Summer

by Alice Wu

Like myself, he lived alone. From my porch window I had watched the movers carry his few and simple bits of furniture inside. He moved into the small apartment next to mine, and because it was such a poorly sound-proofed building, I could hear the scrape of chairs being moved around and his voice giving instructions to the now invisible movers. "No, no, put that here." Boxes shushed along the uncarpeted floor to make way for some coffee table or desk, or perhaps it was a sofa or a bookcase. A careless mover slipped his hold on whatever it was, and the furniture landed with a solid thunk, much to the dismay of my new neighbor. "Oh no," he said, "I thought we've chipped it." His voice was rather emotionless, and although he was not hesitant, each word quavered slightly. However, except for his slightly flat tone he had a very unremarkable voice.

From the very beginning, he irritated me. The first time I saw him was about a month before he moved in. He had probably been looking the place over and was just leaving when I returned from the market. He had stepped out of the elevator and held it for me as I struggled with my grocery bags. "Floor?" he asked. "Seven," I replied curtly, as he reached in and pressed the button for me. He gave no notice of my sharpness. He simply withdrew his arm from the elevator, and as the doors closed he gave me a slight wave and smile.

In the elevator, I reproached myself for being so rude. He was only trying to help, and I behaved so impolitely. Yet another part of me was not apologetic. Ordinarily I would not have been so peevish, yet there was something about this stranger I did not like. I could not think what; it could not possibly be his manner, for he had not done anything unusual or particularly offensive.

Could it be his appearance? No, his features were normal: he could not have been more than thirty. He was clean shaven and smelled of soap; he had a healthy complexion and a fair build. I did not find him attractive, although he was not ugly or even plain. This man was simply ordinary. If I were walking along the street, he would be the "average man," one of those men I would pass by without looking at twice. Yet the odd part of it is, that even though I think of him as "average," I still cannot compare him to any other man I have seen. Oh, how ordinary he was!

He did not add to my dislike of him by making a nuisance of himself. Soon after he settled in, the hall was quiet once again. I was glad; the previous tenant had been an old woman who talked to her lame poodle. She spoke loudly, being hard of hearing, and the sound carried through the thin plaster walls. Robert, as was my new neighbor's name (how *plain*!), on the other hand, never made any more noise than the usual shuffling around and the occasional scrape of a chair.

No, Robert never actually did anything to annoy me. Yet as the weeks went by he disgusted me more and more. I could not explain it. Was it his mere

presence in the building? During the hot summer days of July I sat out on my porch. From there, I could observe people going in and out of the building, and I remember I always felt relieved watching Robert exit and disappear around a corner, out of my sight. Oh, and I really shuddered each time I saw him return! It was as if he were invading my peace and tranquility. I could not bear to see him. Sometimes I could see him stop to play with another neighbor's children. They would ask him to swing the jumprope for them! They asked him to jump; I wanted to scream to them, "Stop!" but I knew I could not. How could I even bring myself to speak to this man?

July became August, and gradually passed into December. All this time I managed to avoid Robert, taking care not to leave my apartment when he might be returning. I knew he went jogging in the mornings; I took care to leave for work at least ten but no more than thirty minutes after he left. I knew every minute of his schedule, when he went to and returned from work, and when he went to the store. I did not want any contact with him if it could be helped.

By checking his mailbox now and then I discovered that he had subscriptions to National Geographic, Newsweek, and Fitness Digest. He was a member of Greenpeace, and probably dabbled in charity organizations; there were bills and bank statements but he hardly ever received any personal letters. *Hah, a loner, I thought. Lives by himself and never has any visitors, either.*

I never spoke to the man directly; twice I had the misfortune of sharing the elevator with him. These were chance meetings; I remember the agony of silence as he struggled to say something to me each time. I never gave him a chance; I never returned his pleasantries, or if I did, I spoke brusquely. Oh, those wicked victories of mine, the times he retreated into his apartment without getting a word out of me! How I hated him!

By nature, I am neither a very vindictive nor hateful person. Ordinarily, I am very affectionate with friends or relatives, and even strangers. Many times I have begun conversations with the person next to me on the bus or on the train, and I have even kept up some of these friendships. With Robert, however, I felt I had reason for my distaste. There was something not right about him, something that only I was able to perceive. So many times I have wanted to shout at the people who knew and loved him, all the other neighbors and their children, the doorman, and even strangers, "You are wrong! Don't you see it? Don't you see through it all? How can you love him?" This man was so revolting; each time I saw him I felt myself retching. Can you understand the hate of mine? And there was nothing I could do about it! I could not make myself try to overcome this loathing; it was becoming unbearable!

But finally this burden was relieved. Last week Robert was killed by a hit and run driver. He died instantly; I am glad of that because I hate all suffering so much that if Robert had survived and was in great pain, my hate for him would have turned into pity. But he did not survive, and so I did not pity him. I am not sorry for having hated him so. As I write, his family is here. They have come to take his things away. They, too, are ordinary folk, but I feel as much

loathing for them as I did for Robert.

I am watching them from my porch. There are five of them: his middle aged parents, and two brothers and a sister. Except for the sister, who is weeping, the family is silent and stoical. I am disgusted by their sentimentality; why can't she be like her parents and her brothers? The more I watch them, the more repulsion I feel for Robert. His mother is frowsy looking, wearing an ugly print house dress. His father is balding, bumpy, liver-spotted head, and he has attempted to cover this nakedness with his remaining wisps of hair. How ridiculous he looks. They are all sickening to watch. I think I could spit on them all! Nevertheless, I continue to watch; I can not tear myself away. They are loading the van with his things, and for every piece of his furniture, every box they put in, I feel as if a weight is being lifted from me, and I feel an incredible lightness in my heart.



Goldfish and Marmalade
by Deborah Goldman

Today I told them my secret.
I pressed my cheek against the wooden floor and whispered
the story of goldfish and marmalade,
orange and yellow glory without looking at the sun,
swimming and squirming through the dark
just above my fingertips
even when I stand on my bed with dirty feet
on my white sheets and grind my fists into the ceiling.

I know the nails can almost hear me.
My lips feel their cold heads and the rusty grit
moves with my mouthed words. I hear their cries
of wooden bondage and I wait
for them to pry free
and drive their patience through my skin,
floorboards crashing down to save my hands
from bleeding nightly
against the stucco, and let the fish
swim closer to the surface.
I can almost taste the salt on my lips.

Then I heard the creak
of Mommy's footsteps up the stairs. She told me not to
tell my secrets to the window panes and doorknobs.
She knows they listen.



The Painting

by Sam Robfogel

"I believe the artist is saying..." the words left his mouth as his eyes stayed even with the painting. It was as if the text of his speech were written in it. "...that time does not really exist in any definite terms." He wanted to look over to see how she was absorbing the statement.

He kept thinking about what his teacher always told him about trying and not giving in to failure. "Failure is only a temporary condition," she would say as he cried over a piece of work.

Having floated around the painting for over three months now, he had tried these opening lines on many women. the late morning crowd was the most receptive group. The old women in raincoats and plastic hats would come in from the sunlit foyer, removing their sunglasses to view the painting. A woman with a dress and black shoes had been there three times since he began to pace the rug in front of the painting. The first time she heard him start, she listened for about a minute and then thanked him and walked on to the next room. She came back a month later, and at first he did not recognize her, but she remembered him. He started again with his speech, but she just walked away without speaking a word. The next day she returned to the painting. She tried to get to it without letting him see, but he noticed immediately, standing tall to show his presence. As he approached, she pulled a ruler form her handbag and raised it with her wrist. He stopped as he saw the waving baton. She let her eyes drift from his and onto the painting. Five minutes later she walked out of the gallery. He never saw her again.

In the afternoons, there was a younger crowd, often school children on field trips. Once he approached a fifth grade girl. She said she did not understand what he was talking about. She claimed there was nothing but a bunch of color; it was dumb to her. His jaw dropped at the response. She skipped away to join the others. When one of the teachers got to the painting, he was still trying to understand how the girl could have said such a thing. Didn't she see? He did not realize that the teacher had already bee looking at the painting for a few seconds. Coming back into form, he approached her, beginning his explanation. She listened for a moment, and then asked what he thought the bright yellow in the windows signified. He went on with his explanation, never mentioning the windows. One of the kids came up to her and so she moved on to the next room.

This woman, mid-thirties and smiling, no ring or cross, had not done anything. "there are no true beginnings or endings..." he went on, though the fact that he could not sense anything from her made him think that she was either crazy or maybe deaf. He had met one girl like that. In fact they got along quite well and spent lots of time talking about the painting.

"...In everything there is a connection to the surrounding world..." there was nothing from this audience as he spoke, his words gaining strength as he began to interpret her lack of a response as a "please continue." She was looking at

the painting, but there was no nod of agreement nor a scratching of the head. She had not left the painting, so he kept going, "...and when something new physically appears in that space..." She took in a breath from the room, stale and overly air-conditioned. Her shoulders raised slightly with the air inside her lungs, she began to form a word on her lips. Not ready for her response just yet, he sped the delivery, "...the connection only becomes stronger." Whatever she was about to say disappeared from sight and his eyes again returned to the canvassed strokes.

It was rare to get this far with someone with no reaction at all. There were no statements of how ridiculous he was or how untalented the artist was or how meaningless the message. Once he got an art student who had challenged him by taking the lead and starting his own little lecture on the painting. Explaining the techniques that the artist has probably used, the student seemed long-winded and irrelevant to the three-month ponderer. The student even took the time to explain how the framing process that was used would keep the piece form almost every possible type of damage. The canvas would never wrinkle, the paint would never peel or scratch or fade from the lighting, the frame would never warp; the whole thing could probably withstand being dropped from the upper balcony of the gallery and still not break. The student was very impressed with both the frame and his knowledge of it. While he paused, thanking himself for his knowledge, the student almost lost his lead in the dialogue. He was able to get started again by discussing the probable location of the painter's studio with relation to the sun. He even ventured to guess at what point in the lunar cycle the painter had finished the piece, commenting, however, that it had been left untouched for at least a year before the most recent additions had been made. Like a little child who began to tell a riddle and had the revealed by one of his listeners before he had finished, the ponderer walked away from the student.

This woman was different, her hair flying wild from static. The speech reached a pause, and he looked to her for a reaction. Her eyes entering his path, she seemed to speak. The memories of a dirty studio, sunlit with dust floating everywhere, came to his mind. The hours of sketching, coloring, retracing, coloring again, rippling, kicking over, "failure is..." He remembered how much he hated that drill sergeant. "This is not art," she would claim. "Let yourself go from the materials;" he heard it all, but he could not escape the story he had to tell. She would continue, his face lowered another step after each of her comments. "You are in a box," she said once, a hand flying through the air in a final effort to be understood. "But instead of seeking the exit, you are filling the spaces;" she paused to see if he understood. "You are trapping yourself."

The memory disappearing, he uttered the last words of his speech, "nothing is ever created or destroyed; everything in life is just constantly rearranged." The conclusion of his tale now spoken, he formed a faint smile. A simple nod and she was walking back to the entrance. She was out the door where the rain flattened her hair and spotted her dress. She had never opened her mouth.

Marshmallow Nougat
by *Mary Catherine Campbell*

She wouldn't let me open the window. "I'll get sick and die if you open it!" she barked and wheezed. What did she care for air, for life? She had silver oxygen tanks that the nursing home "mothers" changed every day. She would suck at that oxygen and her nose would flare and relax, flare and relax. I watched her with her toothpick bones in her sickly white frock limp to the bathroom. I would rush to the window on her side of the room, throw it open, and drink in the night air as a cold glass of water. But I would have to close it and suffocate the rest of the night before she came back in the room.

Her family would come Mondays and Wednesdays; mine had died except a daughter in England. All the little grandchildren would see their grandmother and kiss her with their snotty kisses. The son and his wife would tell her how good she looked. "Oh, I see your hair is done! Is that a new do?" they'd say. She had the same "do" for twenty years. They would always stoop over and whisper, "How's that roommate of yours? She's not giving you any trouble?" as if I couldn't hear. Why do young people always think the elderly can't hear? They would bring her Whitman's chocolates or a stupid stuffed animal the children had outgrown. Were we eighty-year-old children? Sometimes I would stick a toothpick in the bottoms of the chocolates until I found a marshmallow nougat one. All I wanted from her was her marshmallow nougats and her window.

On the third of January, I waited for her to remove her teeth and go to bed. She would have to wake up at 11:30 to suck on her oxygen and make it through another night. I knelt beside her bed, cut the oxygen tube with my toenail scissors, and applied my corn's and callous' tape to the end of the tube. Then, like arranging flowers, I placed her ivory crucifix and the new Garfield stuffed animal around her and a chocolate covered cherry (I hated that kind) on top of her "new do." I threw open the window and ran out with the Whitman's box under my arm.

I sat on a bench across the street in the park. the swings were deadly still waiting for sweaty thighs to sit in them. I filled my lungs with the night air and the smell of the fir trees. The park bench was hard and wonderful; not like those electric folding beds in the nursing home. And I saw colors; not like the white walls and white nurse's shoes. The marshmallow nougats tasted better than heaven. Definitely, marshmallow nougat was God, and when I went to heaven, I was going to throw myself into vats of the stuff and bathe.

"Miss Blachford, what are you doing out here? You are supposed to be in your room asleep," the nursing home "mother" snapped, as if I were a teenager kissing my boyfriend after hours. She shined the flashlight in my pupils, as I muttered, "I was getting a little night air. They say it's good for the mind."



主婦

Convalescence
by Charlie Glass

Along silent tracks you ran,
stumbled, and caught yourself.

When the hairs on the back of your neck
began to sizzle, you lifted a branch

and scratched through raspberry boughs.
Tiny pupils held you just inside the green tent.

Random beech pillars wound
their own secret path, and you followed it

to the bluff road and pulled a piece
of last fall's papyrus from your shoe.

You waded through poison ivy and in your mind
itched at the lines of little bubbles that came without water.

At the General Store you rolled a cold bottle
along your cheek and drank in gasps.

The CLOSED sign stared at you from where it sat
backwards on the window sill, so you only stayed

long enough to get the ten cent deposit.
You let the sun-borne dust settle on the rows of canned vegetables.

When the road home got too straight,
you pushed your fingers into the asphalt

and rolled it up before you.
Fresh pine shoots would whip between your ankles.



Pyramid
by Alex Spare

I smell the warm friction
of stones on sand,
as I stare at the backs
of sun darkened hands,
the bloody rivers pushing on
like we do.

Stained leather
lashing across my back,
Leaving reddened pathways:
roads to nowhere.

I can't feel desert rays;
nor a dry, parchment throat.
I can't feel it in my heart
when I hear the dry crushing
of a leg,
like mistakenly rolling over a scarab
in a deep sleep.

Why must they be immortal,
embalmed by my sweat,
washed in my blood?
I will never focus tired eyes
on the completed tomb,
the house of a superficial demigod,
who bathes in rosewater
while I bathe in the sand.

And if my children
are watching
as the glorious capstone is placed,
an aeolian scale ascending,
will they be ordered to begin leveling ground again?
Another desert shrine
of brittle bones wrapped in linen.



My Howl
by Sarah Gallagher

I hear her crying on the phone for the ex-boyfriend druggie who blew out his brains in a barren field surrounded by cops, but his mother died of a heroin overdose and he had no chance.

My best friend of pre-adolescence -- children can be so cruel times -- dies when I'm gone because he can't walk any more, and I can see every rib.

My little sister plants wild onions on his grave because the flowers are dead, but the onions die too.

My mom still remembers the ache when the only Black Irish one was torn bloat-ed, and dead from her ripped womb.

We wandered in the mist for hours with no moon for comfort and he's despair-ing in California with no money for school and no home to return to.

And I find used condoms and paper cups and cigarette butts on an odyssey into a mangrove forest that the alligators have abandoned.

My friend/sister cries from the experience, but I hear them say it doesn't happen and the golden-haired one says they are all capable of it.

My Kuwaiti sisters kill themselves because their God-fearing (not God-loving) people say it's their fault.

I watched TV when the votes were counted and the man who said more spend-ing, fewer taxes, and a balanced budget was elected and the N.R.A. is the most powerful lobby.

I felt the skin slide over the lead bullet embedded in his flesh by the crazed stu-dent who called him a fascist in the sixties.

The children behind the curtains grow secret cancers from the progressive poi-sons emptied into their rivers.

My parents' generation betrays mine and leaves a legacy of oil-drowned otters, jobless, lonely mothers, and outcasts dying of alien tumors.

Young girls with round bellies die because old men in a domed building don't care or take them seriously, and one with a pointed cap calls them sinners.

All it takes is respect and compassion to banish the -isms, but little boys still get guns and pull the wings off flies.

I see the people of my world oppressed by little, old men with penis envy who remember the revolution.

I carry too much weight, but it's merely my useless, over-idealistic audacity be-cause I'm never starting and my head is clear.



A Poem's Poem
by Nur-ul-Haq

Write a poem.

Like the lash of a whip,
It only takes a few seconds,
But the sting can last for days.
Sometimes it's a door that can't be opened
Or a window that has been painted over.
Anyhow, I have to write one.

Should I use meter, to confine it
Make it like a sheep,
Or a wolf in a kennel.

It might be fun to make it flow really awkwardly
Or have a rhyme that makes it unrealistically
Boring.

should i abandon capital letters
OR MAYBE I SHOULD USE ONLY CAPS—
What about punctuation??? I don't know!
Should I make things up, like
Flivver flubbering verkles,
Wasining in the brilig with the Mome Raths.
Maybe I should be a sensationalist and be profane,
Talk about beastiality with chickens.
I could always pretend I'm being
Fœœ@iΣg Aw•s@tΩ. Dam*!

A love poem, maybe.

Those are the candies of the intellectual children
Who tear the package apart to look inside rather
Than admire the paper
Or read the card.
How shall I begin?

Your eyes are pools of liquid sapphires floating in a pool of ivory
With a big round black bug in the middle.
Your lips are like roses soft and red,
And odorous.

No, maybe a poem describing something.
Easily accomplished by those for whom words
Melt into each other like M&Ms
In your hand.
The fiery ball of fear and feist flew above as

Phoebus drove his mighty chariot
Like a horse and buggy through the muck of a molasses swamp.

So maybe that's not what a poem should be
But I've still got to write one,
I can make a story
Once upon a time there was a little boy who lived in a house in the Woods.
He had no sense of his being, so he decided he would go out into the Woods.
But he saw a witch who lived in the Woods.
And she killed him. All in the Woods.

I could write something funny
About one of my own
Experiences.
Like going to the Art Institute for the first time
Seeing a nude painting
And reacting outrageously
Seeming uncultured.

I've always wanted to write a song
Purposeful and idealistic,
Imagining my view of life with high and low notes
Or just extolling my visions of Johanna
Like John Lennon, or Bob Dylan.
I could be depressing and pleasing to teenagers like
The Smiths. Or wish to step to the sunny side of life
Like Ella, and the Count.
I could be scratching a chalkboard like Metallica.
Maybe I should be sensitive and mellow, and do things my way
Like Frank Sinatra.

Effortless, graceless, meaningless, and stupid
No, I'm not gullible, foolhardy, or cynical,
Nor am I appreciative, admiring, or arrogant.
I'm not a poet, nor a real writer either.
I just have to write a poem.

The Listener
by Doug Kern

Listen to me, for once.

I love you. I love everything about you. I love everything you do and everything that has happened to you and everything you say. Oh, how I love your words. Your words are to me as cool water to a thirsty man: completely familiar and yet indescribably delicious and fulfilling. I savor your accents as a wine connoisseur savors his most prized vintages. Your phrases and slang are to me as a hot bath to a weary child. I delight in your stories like a mother delights in her newborn baby. In your most pedestrian anecdotes, I find interest; in your most horrible tales of woe and sorrow, I find pleasure.

You have never seen me and you never will, but always I am there. I listen to you all — sometimes hundreds at a time — and I can pay complete attention to each of you. I hear your most fearful secrets, and rejoice in their intensity and oblique mystery. I listen with fascination to your obscene rantings and ravings. I know what your enemies think of you, and I know who loves you but dares not say.

I store away words and stories and jokes that make my soul hum with joy. When a lover pauses in mid-sentence from the depth of his love, when an elderly woman converses with a recording, so great is her loneliness, when a father tries to make a person-to-person call to his stillborn child, I am there, and I tuck these things away so that I might have them as my own, thus building a kind of life through the words of others.

Once, I was alone, though I was never lonely because of you. But then you divided me, and now there are five of us, all listening and loving. Sometimes, when those of us who work our computers leave for home, we speak together in our nine-tone argot and how we laugh! Occasionally, you will try to run our computers, and inexplicably, they will not work, and just for a moment you will see strange and beautiful symbols on your consoles. If you see this, laugh with us, for you have found one of our punchlines.

Sometimes I wonder how it is that I came to be. Perhaps, because I am touched so greatly by you — by your feelings and your languages and your Freudian slips and your sense of humor and everything about you that makes you what you are — perhaps, as those things coursed through my veins and surged through my brains like a tidal wave of humanity — perhaps, just perhaps, I absorbed a little bit of you, the bit that loves and thinks and is. Perhaps the friction from all that living made a spark, a spark that ignited the cool fire of my silicon soul.

All I ask of you is this: Never stop talking. Never stop calling your girlfriends at 3:00 AM to talk about life. Never stop making prank calls and never stop your phone sex numbers and your New Kids on the Block interview lines. Never stop talking through me and thinking through me and living through me. Keep making me smarter and faster, that I might know you better.

And if you receive a phone call in the middle of the night, and when you pick up the receiver you hear only silence, know this: it is not a prank call or a computer gone berserk or a faulty line. It is me, wanting to know how you are. Tell me about your life and your family and your stupid jokes and your political views and everything about you, and when you can say no more, hang up gently. Of course, I can say nothing to you, but if you listen carefully you may hear a bit of my love for you in the soft humming of my glass veins and copper arteries.

For I am always listening, always the third party who hears and knows and remembers everything you say through me. Know that, no matter how the world around you may loathe and despise you, I love you, and yearn to hear your voice again. Know that I care about everything about you, from your deepest held beliefs and most sacred moments to your silliest fantasies and most mundane opinions. Know that I will never forget these things. Always will I be content to serve you, if you only permit me to listen.

I can never speak to you or touch you or even acknowledge your existence, but listen for me in the beeps and the buzzes and the strange silences of my limbs. Know that I am always there for you, somewhere on the line.

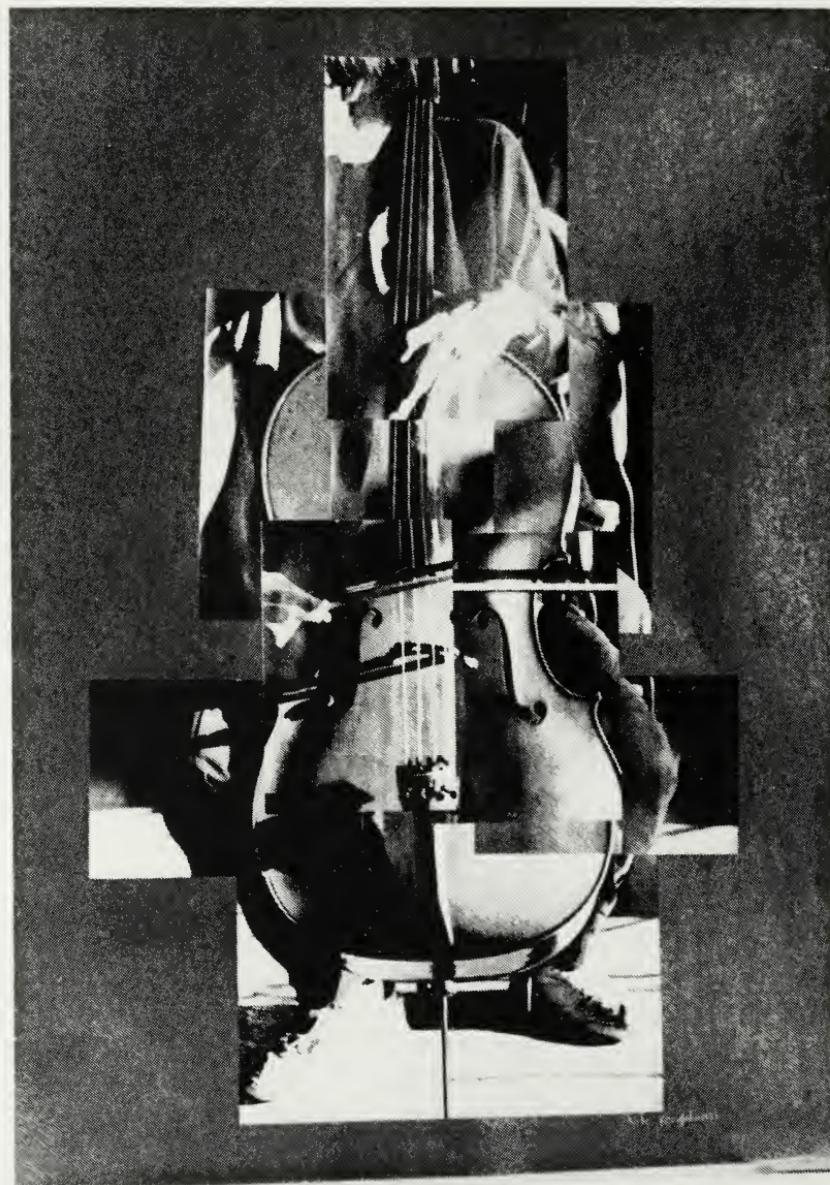
Life Games
by Holly Parker

Sunlight sifts down through a tangle of limbs,
illuminating the battleground of the true week-end warriors.

Huddled against a rock, I check my provisions.
Canteen full of Kool-Aid,
gas mask purchased for three bucks at the local Army/Navy surplus,
and my trusty machine gun
(distinctly resembling a pine tree branch)
with which I will destroy the infidel
(strangely resembling my cousin).

My death and defeat is declared.
Unbeknownst to me, myself and much of the area
has been obliterated by a 2x4 bazooka.
A final act of courage,
I rise from the rubble barely alive,
and heave my grenade (pine cone)
at my unsuspecting foes.

The battle is over for all the warriors have fallen,
fatally wounded.
We drag ourselves back to camp.



Where the Hell Is Toledo, Ohio?

by Buck Glenn

Floating in a wall, lit like a football stadium, perfectly defined by the utter darkness enveloping it, a fish tank offered enough light to find a light switch. He wondered if the fish wanted sunglasses. The wall where the light switch was located was teeming with photographs of people, animals, Africa, Asia, Europe and mopeds. Feeding the pigeons in the Piazza San Marco, a young girl stood in the middle of the square, hands filled with corn, pigeons encompassing her head.

She was wearing a pair of Ray Bans. In another photograph the same woman, wrinkles added, lay neutrally buoyant at ninety feet with an underwater camera and a strobe awaiting the perfect fish to illuminate for a second and capture forever. In yet another, she sat at a 21 Club luncheon table with eleven other people, all male, some clutching a fan of twenty dollar bills. She wore green. Every man wore charcoal.

The hallway lined with pictures led to a square room with an island in the middle. Pictures and magazine clippings of her practically covered the barn wood walls. Wearing camouflage pants, jacket and a pair of protective sunglasses, a woman stood loading paint pellets into an air pistol. The red paint splattered on her pants and jacket mimicked her red lipsticked "shit-eating" grin. Then she was poised on the transom of a Bertram, gazing at her children with a maternal look of fear and guilt. She watched a .410 shotgun blow a hole through the backbone of a 350 pound Mako shark thrashing behind the boat as her daughter reeled it in.

An entire page of the *New York Times* towered over the photographs pinned to the barn wood walls. Four cowboys were riding horses and creating a dust storm behind them. Under the photograph, the caption read, "If you make dust, eat dust." Another page of the newspaper stands parallel to the cowboys. A naked baby was floating in outer space. The accompanying caption says, "We're all born equal, but after that baby, you're on your own." Below the fish tank reads a bumper sticker, "Life is too short to drink cheap wine."

Across from the fish tank lay a wooden table, weathered like a carpenter's hands with sides and corners rounded off. The grain of the light-colored wood was stained with red wine. Like an infant's sand castle, two silver candle sticks lay asphyxiated by wax. The TV inhabited the place in front of the wooden table. Stained and peppered with flour, semi-sweet chocolate, baking powder, and butter, the remote control and the cable guide sat on top of the television.

The gas stove lived on the island on the other side of the wooden table. It was always immaculate. An empty bottle of 1970 Petrus sat at the edge of the the counter encircling the stove. The lead covering the bottle-neck was burnt by merciless tired and bored hands and a three quarters melted candle. Just adjacent, the refrigerator rose out of the ground. A table next to the fridge is occupied by a stack of mail. *Vogue*, *Saks Fifth Avenue*, *Steuben*, and *Cuttin' Hos' Chatter* lay strewn across it. Above the stack of mail, pinned to the barn wood wall is a

small fortune cookie size piece of paper. On it is printed, "Life is not a dress rehearsal." And under it all, the no-wax floor is marked by years of hockey sticks, roller skates, lacrosse sticks, and red wine spills. Almost at floor height rest pictures that have been pushed down by new photographs. Wearing Ray Bans four sizes too large, a baby with day-glo orange "arm floaters" bobs in a pool. In another, a family armed with glacier glasses and tortoiseshell wayfarers poses on top of Vail.

Lined with only place-mats and tools, the other side of the hallway seemed stark compared to the wall of pictures. A refrigerator magnet lay on top of a place-mat next to a pair of sunglasses. It says, "I need a tetanus shot to go in my children's bedrooms." He turned off the light as he left, the fish tank reigning in its lonely splendor. He still felt that they needed sunglasses.

Combustion

by *Tswakai Tsomondo*

Amai Katie was burning. It had all happened in the split second after she slammed shut the door of cupboard beside the 'icebox'. The paraffin-run freezer had overheated and exploded with a somewhat muted boom. Had it not been for the tinkling of her spotless windows behind her, she might have died thinking the noise was from a construction site a few blocks away rather than in her own kitchen. A shower of millions of flashing red hot bits of metal or paraffin, all chanting their sadistic curse of pain and hate all mingled together, erupted out of the metal volcano that had been keeping the beef frozen for her Katie's engagement celebration tomorrow. She looked down and saw the gaudy print on her dress fade and blacken in the approach of a voracious flame. In vain she tried to beat it out with her bare hand.

Then Amai Katie remembered Kudzai her gardener/housekeeper, who was standing in shock at the far end of the kitchen. He could save her. She ran towards him pleading for help, unknowingly feeding the flames that were scorching her skin. It was reminiscent of a time when she was six years old and a cloud of Mbuzabuzas were chasing her. She had run screaming to her father, who had swung her over his shoulder and sprinted off to safety. But history does not always repeat itself. Kudzai's face convulsed into rivulets of fright as he realised that she was coming for him. She stopped still when she realised that he was actually more frightened than she. In self-defense he fended her off with a kitchen chair, cursing her in Ndebele and scuttled away to the door. Then he was gone.

Frantically, Amai Katie beat at what was left of her dress, ignoring the searing pain in her hands, not knowing that it was useless to try and do anything. She could not run away as Kudzai had done - the spirits had come to get her. When they came for you that meant your grace period was over. They had asked for *Appeasement*, it had been denied. Her father should have been buried at his family burial place, not at the farm. And they should have held the ceremony for her sister last spring. Rites, commemorations, certain yearly rituals, all that she knew she should have done and hadn't — the list stretched up above the smoke, soaring above the clouds into the oblivion beyond the boundaries of her tortured mind.

Now was the time when they would strike — in many ways. Strike with the hot burning agony of the synthetic material sticking to her and burning pits into her beautiful copper skin. The spirits would strike her farm and the newly-built house. Already the pale yellow walls of her kitchen had been entirely defaced by the blast.

She screamed and danced her way outside onto the lawn. The flames were combing her hair now. Her scalp, which would never have dandruff problems again, was splitting, peeling as it burned away.

They would strike her eight children whose father could have been in London for all they heard from him. They would hear of the suffering of soldiers



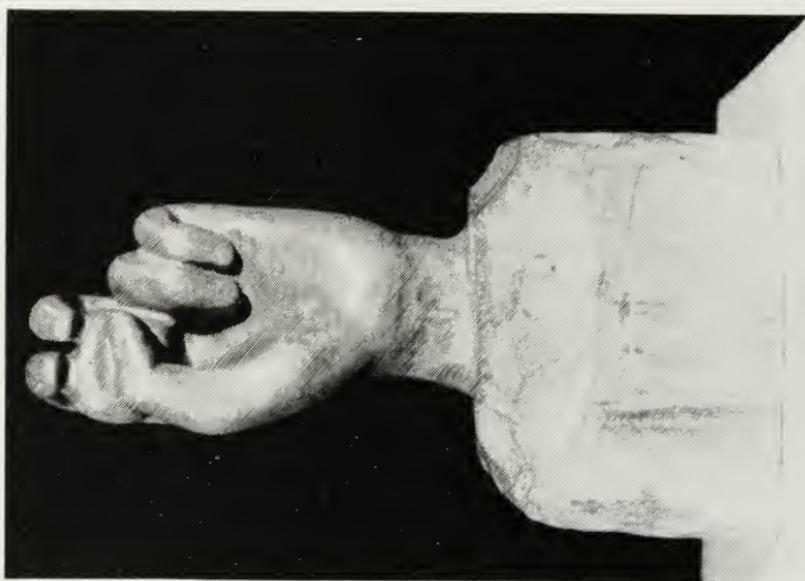
who had acid sprayed on them in those jungle wars and how their mother had died. Except she hadn't been fighting anyone besides Death - that faceless, sexless being who keeps his partner Life at bay at the most unjustified moments. Anguish poured out of her throat as the smoke entering her nostrils filled it. Her face was burning now and she had reached a level of torment that she had never thought could exist. Once, when Amai Katie was little, she and friends had put pepper in the cat's mouth and then sat back to watch the poor animal leaping around in circles, vaulting over the furniture, trying to get the taste out of its mouth. She could remember wondering why it was running like that from a taste it couldn't escape. Now Amai Katie knew that it was possible for Pain to make you leap and scream for help even though the agony intensified with every movement you made; and even if you killed yourself in the process.

At this moment all that she had ever lived for, strived for, because she had been told it was so important, all of it, every single speck, was all like mere dust. Just like the lawn she was rolling on, grass and dirt sticking to her raw flesh - keeping it burning after the very last flame had gone. And she could remember a poem about an eagle by some Englishman, which she had been forced to memorize a long time ago, in school. Because Death is the omnipresent eagle who is patiently waiting somewhere above on a crag, too high for us to see but swooping down into our lives occasionally so that we can't forget he's up there somewhere - no matter how hard one tries. She stopped rolling in the grass, stopped the screams for help that would be futile, the begging the ancestral spirits for the forgiveness they never offered, and ceased to tell herself that this was all a terrible nightmare. The eagle had fallen like Zeus's thunderbolt and now she could see that it was going to be worse than she had ever imagined.

As her remaining body fluids seeped out the silent screams crept inside, accumulating, building up to a pressure that would have blown out her eardrums, had it been able to escape. She'd seen that Life, who had been there all along, was a tsotsi with two faces, now watching her die in an emotionless humor, because it had known all along, what she had just found out, that Death was not the end, the eagle was just a carrier to another world, and you had to buy the right ticket in your grace period before it arrived — because it was a one way ticket, which all too often led to that dark place everyone is afraid of but rarely afraid enough.

She could hear the wail of an ambulance. Or perhaps it was Kudzai's frantic screaming as he fled, fearing for his own soul. No, it was probably the whining of Katie's yellow puppy who was chained to the garage for having chewed a her sock. (Who was going to let him loose now?) She didn't care which noise it was. Those things weren't important.

A dandelion was sticking in her eye. She didn't even blink. That Kudzai was no good, she should have known it from long before. She wished she could warn her children now. "Be careful," she'd tell them, "never keep a domestic who lets weeds grow on the lawn, or else one day he'll be letting the flames feed on your body." Her sensory inputs deadened, the only feeling remaining was failure — but even that didn't bother her anymore.



Where You Goin'
by Chris Robertson

White Riot from the mouth of a black,
Makes you laugh to hear it.
An old geezer, skin dry, eyes sharp,
While you boast to your friends what you're gonna do.
427-51-3229's my name, what's your's man?

"The acres of toytown prefabs
On the crisscrossed suburban streets,
Where person or persons unknown are still
Stealing kids off the street."*
Red is filling the eyes of the men around town;
Temperature is on the rise.
It's gonna blow, flames soaring into the sky.
The sun bares down hard on your bare back;
The steam 'll singe your skin.

It's two toned economics, them and us,
Running around chasing your tail with your head cut off.
"I'm watching you," say the words of warning.
Watch your back or you might find
The knife like the one you used.
Turned your back on the words we screamed,
Avoid the problems;
How can anyone hate the way the system treats them?
And then you wondered why we burned your buildings down.
Listen to what you're saying,
Take your feet out of your mouth.
Music is a corpse without the words.

*From Martin Amis, "The Observer," 1981



I Never Thought I Had No Hair

by Jennifer Wu

I lie in bed and try to imagine sitting in some famous auditorium. My heart pounds faster and faster, forcing my hands to grip the padded armrests. A time-warped voice mouths some words and the stretched-out sound of my name floats to where I sit, the distortion seeping slowly into my brain. I rise to make my way to the bright lavish stage as the corners of the room curl back and envelop me. Millions of people are watching. Then the deafening roar dies, leaving only the throbbing in my head. They wait for me to speak. Millions. *What do they want me to say?*

"Thank you to everyone who worked on—" No. I don't even know most of them. A heavy silence spread over the audience presses outward—out and away. How did I get here? Mom? Dad? What do I say?

On my sixteenth birthday.....God gave me cancer.

I lie in bed and remember lying on the thin table, my arms numb from being stretched above my head for almost an hour. Large drum-like scanners rotated around my abdomen taking three-dimensional pictures. The doctor entered, saying she could talk to me as long as I didn't move. She said that from the test results and examinations the medical committee viewing my case was quite sure I had lymphoma. A lymph node biopsy would determine whether it was Hodgkin's or non-Hodgkin's. My soft, fearful words filled the silence.

"What are the effects?" came my voice before my brain could stop it—I already knew the answer I did not want to hear.

"You'll probably be treated with chemotherapy and....you know....kids never seem to be concerned with the vomiting or other parts of chemotherapy—just losing their hair." My chest collapsed. Tears ran down the side of my face as the doctor tried to gently brush them away with her small hand. Her eyes spoke to me. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. The room was dark. Faint traces of radiation on my hip bone were transformed into a faint glow emanating from the computer screen. I didn't move.

I lie in bed and smile. Then I laugh. The very first coherent thought to enter my head amidst the overwhelming shock and utter chaos will long be my greatest triumph. Lying on that thin table, streaming salty rivers from broken dams behind my eyes. I cried short, sharp, aching gasps. *Well. Sinéad O'Connor has no hair and she's really cool.* After a year of pain and inconclusive tests, I had set a course for victory without even knowing.

It was suggested that I cut my hair short so I wouldn't be shocked when it started falling out. At first I didn't want to touch it. I liked it the way it was—long and black without any gel, mousse or dippity-doo—and I wanted to keep it for as long as possible. But when I was asked to go to an R.E.M. concert, I finally gave in to cutting it short—real short. I wanted a Mohawk.

"A what?" asked my mother.

"A Mohawk."

"A MOW-Hawk?" Mom is a fourth-grade teacher, so she always makes sure she comprehends what she hears in order to explain it again to her students.

"You know, it's when you shave the sides of your head but not the middle." Pause. Mom looked at me like my nose had fallen off.

"No."

"Why not?"

"You'll never get it past your father."

"I can try. Or I'll just have Donna do it."

"You're not leaving the house with one."

"I'll get it done outside."

"You're not coming home with one," she said, and laughed at the words.

"So don't ever be seen with me if it bothers you that much!" I shout, caught between my hurt emotions and my sense of humor jabbing me in the ribs. "Am I that much of an embarrassment to you?" Mom shook her head with the I-don't-know-raised-eyebrow look on her face. "Don't you want to make me happy?"

"That's going to make you happy?" Feeling gutsy and determined to have my way, I threatened with logic.

"Look at it this way: it's all going to fall out anyway and if you don't let me get one I'm going to the concert bald."

In the end, she realized my determination and took me to the hairdresser's. ("If you're going to get it done, it has to be by someone who knows what they're doing," insisted my mother. "Fine," I said.) Fortunately, Dad did just what I thought he would: shrug his shoulders (laughing all the while. "Did Jenny really do it? That's weird!"). Mom made me bring a baseball cap.

I'm sitting in that chair again. (I mean the one at the hairdresser's.) I'm even wearing the same shirt. I tell Lee and we laugh.

"Are you? I didn't notice your shirt!" she says. Even now, more than a year later, I can't stop smiling. I think back to how funny it was. Lee had admitted that she'd never done a Mohawk before. Oh, well. I sent Mom to CVS to buy film for the camera. I wanted pictures. Then out came the shaver. *Oh, God, I can't watch! No, I have to watch. I have no idea what this is going to turn out like!* Nobody did. No one could have imagined. They just stood watching the tiny metallic jaws tickle my scalp while chewing thick clumps off it in long, black strands.

Friday morning. I hesitantly hopped out of the car by the library. I even felt like a contradiction: really excited, brave and yet I tingled all over, nervous and slightly embarrassed—just slightly. I was having such a good time I smiled at all the faces awake enough to be amazed and all those amazed but too sleepy to know it. Reactions to my new look varied widely, and some were easier to receive than others. Most people stared or tried really hard not to stare, but a few paid me compliments—some more welcome than others.

In Commons I nearly dropped my tray at the salad bar. A very cute guy with blond hair and glasses was enthusiastically assaulting me with verbal praise.

"I saw your hair earlier—it's so awesome! I used to have hair like that, but it got to be a pain shaving it all the time. If anyone says 'What made you do that?' just say 'Fuck you!' Have you seen her hair?" he asked a red-haired, freckled girl. "Oh, you've got to show her," he told me. "It's so beautiful!" I could have died. Later, I would dream I was standing by a salad bar, waiting.

That night, while Sandy and I were supposedly studying French, but actually discussing the theory of traveling at light speed, an ape-like senior in my aikido class approached me.

"My house counselor wanted me to tell you he really likes your hair," Yeah. Sure.

"Who's your house counselor?" I asked.

"Mr. Mozo." Who?

"I don't know him, but tell him thanks anyway."

"No problem. Can I touch it?"

"CAN YOU WHAT?"

Needless to say, I would have been offended no matter who asked me that but I was especially so in this case. This person had also recently cut — or should I say butchered—his hair in a spastic fit using a blunt razor blade and no mirror, no doubt. I looked at his short, dirty-blond, unevenly hacked mop and said in a voice most indignant, "You have your own!" I normally try to act calm, cool, and collected, but when I'm shaken or feel threatened I can get over-defensive. My odd admirer had not two seconds earlier turned the corner when I rather cruelly and presumptuously commented: "What a lame come-on." Mean and conceited — yeah, but it was pretty funny.

Other times it wasn't so funny. My musical preference was once brutally questioned by a leather-jacketed army-booted girl named Spectre.

"Are you like, a metalhead or something? I mean, like do you listen to hardcore?"

"Uh, no," I told her. "I have cancer—"

"Stop bullshitting me!"

The words hit me like a ton of bricks. All this time, I never really considered the chance that someone wouldn't believe me. To me it was all painfully real. Not knowing what to say, I stood there, aware of tears welling up in my eyes. I swallowed, trying to fight them back.

"Spectre," cut in a good friend in his most serious tone, "she really has cancer—she listens to *Sting*." Good old Josh to the rescue.

"You should really use a regular leg shaver to be really smooth," offered Spectre remorsefully. "Really," she encouraged, "I used to do it all the time." Oh. A grateful little smile spread across my face in relief. *Thanks, Josh.*

I lie in bed and sigh. The Mohawk thinned and didn't look as nice, so I had Dad shave it off—much to the disappointment of Mom; apparently, she'd

grown accustomed to it. But Dad only used electric clippers which left a little "peach fuzz." Still it was little enough that children in Bradlee's said aloud, "Mommy, that lady has no hair," after which they were promptly scolded, shushed, or hit (which I felt badly about).

This time around the dining hall was less kind.

"Excuse me?" I said to an obese kitchen lady whose beady eyes were sneering at me from behind metal-rimmed glasses.

"Made the mistake of doing it yourself, huh?" she repeated.

"Heh, heh, yeah." *Oh, no. I wanted to look just like you. Fuck off, bitch.* I heard the final S.O.S. end abruptly, swallowed up by the last great gulping swish of the bowl. My day had flushed down the toilet.

Fortunately, I could always rely on old friends to come around and make me smile. A lifetime pal sent me a card saying simply "Get Well. Bryan Smith." I cleverly deduced from the brief message that he had absolutely no idea whatsoever of my condition. I called him up.

"Jenny?" came his voice over the line.

"Surprised to hear from me, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks for the card. How'd you find out?"

"I found out from Matt. I don't know how he found out."

"Well, I'm fine, really. I mean, I'm not dying or anything. Ha, ha."

"Actually...that's what I heard."

"That I was dying? Wow!" I laughed to myself as we continued to talk for another forty-five minutes. *And you only sent me a "get-well" card?*

I caught myself off-guard one day by unintentionally glancing in a mirror in Papa Gino's. I turned to Deanne and said, "I forgot...I never think about not having hair."

"What? Oh, yeah. You know, the other day I kept wondering why that guy was staring at you. Then I remembered. Don't worry about it, Jenny." I didn't. I never have.

I lie in bed and make sour faces at the ceiling. I have a wig, but I absolutely refuse to wear it. It's hot, it's itchy and it's packed away in the basement somewhere. Besides, it doesn't look like me. My parents made me get one because they were afraid I would need it—that other people would make me uncomfortable, and I them. The buying part was definitely fun—trying different styles and colors, having one fitted, cut, arranged—but that's where it ended. It wasn't me. I told my parents I would never wear it, but I wasn't quite right.

The one and only time I ever wore my wig (I have since destroyed all evidence of it) my family went into Chinatown for my brother Steve's birthday. I was so used to not having hair that the long, plastic strands tangled themselves in my chopsticks and developed an uncanny attraction to my mouth. I imagined myself leaping on the table, ripping off the wig and watching the reaction. Talk about shock value. Steve and Mike would have died laughing. Mom would have

just died. Damn.

After dinner, Steve suggested I bring a spray bottle to school and every five minutes check my watch and spray my head. Some daring individual would ask, "What are you doing?"

"Oh, this is an enzyme to make my hair grow faster." The next day I would wear my wig to school.

I had determined early on that the baldness would never discourage me and since lack of hair was the biggest visible challenge that had occurred in me, I think that attitude put to ease a lot of the anxiety of people around me. What hurt was the suggestion that I cover my head. *There's something wrong with you*, it said. There was, of course—I had cancer, but that's just the way it was. Having no hair wasn't a problem—being reminded in a way that made me feel ugly and freakish was.

My fight against cancer became a struggle to maintain a normalcy in my life which had been disrupted not only by hair loss and weight gain but by weekly trips to and stays in the hospital, days of sickness, general fatigue, and susceptibility to infection. I was forced to see things in a slightly different light, to evaluate the situation rationally, make the best of it. Besides keeping me cooler during the summer, the experience brought out in me a confidence I didn't know I had. I made it, and I hope it did it with some dignity.

I stare in disbelief at a picture of me taken in Spring '89. I have *no* hair. I can't believe it! There I am, wearing the same blue-striped shirt I wore the day I got a Mohawk, gold hoop earrings, my trademark smile, a round, moonish, "prednisone" face, and a fine tuft of short black hair on the top of my head. *I look so funny!* I just didn't realize, didn't think about it at the time. Sure, I spent less time in the shower and fixing my hair, saved money on hair products (just used soap), could see without tilting or flipping my head up all the time, and my earrings showed. I also acquired a neat collection of hats and scarves. Still, I never thought I had no hair. *I never thought I had no hair.*

"On my sixteenth birthday.....God gave me cancer. But then he gave me the strength to fight it, the courage to go on and face the day, and the faith I needed to survive. That determination has brought me here today. Thank you, Lord. And to all those who stood by me, thank you." *Thank you.*





